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JACK ANDERSON and DALE VAN ATTA

Iran Helped in Burning U.S. Embassy

Evidence stashed away in the vaults of the CIA suggests that Iranian agitators played a key role in an anti-American outrage that was initially ignited by Soviet disinformation: the sacking and burning of the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad by a Pakistani mob on Nov. 21, 1979.

The mob had been worked to a frenzy by radio reports that falsely charged the United States with instigating the takeover of the Grand Mosque in Mecca the day before. Descending on the embassy compound in buses, the rioters forced more than 100 U.S. and Pakistani personnel to take refuge in a room-sized security vault. They huddled there in suffocating heat, amid smoke and tear gas fumes for five hours, while the chancery building burned around them.

Two Americans died in the melee: a 20-year-old Marine guard killed by sniper fire and a 30-year-old Army chief warrant officer, who was trapped in his burning apartment.

As we have reported previously, secret CIA reports indicate that KGB disinformation specialists were responsible for the inflammatory report that the United States (and Israel) engineered the seizure of the Grand Mosque. The absurd report was broadcast during a soccer match and was widely believed despite immediate U.S. denials.

It now appears that the Iranians played a crucial part in the Islamabad embassy attack. Part of the Iranian effort was public; part was secret.

At the time of the attack—about two weeks after the takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran—Iranian officials openly accused the

United States of complicity in the mosque seizure by religious extremists.

Intelligence reports from Pakistan in the weeks following the embassy sacking implicated a cadre of Iranian agitators who incited the Pakistanis and virtually led the mob to the embassy.

Five years later, in December 1984, the CIA found another piece of the puzzle during a routine briefing of Charles Kapar, an Agency for International Development employee who had survived a Kuwaiti airliner hijacking. Two AID colleagues were brutally murdered by the hijackers, and Kapar and an American businessman were systematically tortured before being released at the Tehran airport.

During their six-day ordeal, Kapar realized that two Iranian passengers were acting as spies for the hijackers, relaying any hints of passenger resistance. And Kapar was sure he had seen one of the Iranians before, though he couldn't remember where at first.

Before his subsequent debriefing by the CIA, Kapar realized the Iranian had been in the mob that stormed the embassy in Islamabad in 1979. As luck would have it, Kapar had been among 16 Americans at AID headquarters who escaped the rampaging Pakistani mob. He was sure the Iranian passenger on the Kuwaiti airliner had been part of the mob, which swung by the AID building in buses before attacking the embassy.

With incredible luck, Kapar apparently crossed paths with the Iranian agent provocateur twice, and lived to tell the tale.